

# Investing in children levels the playing field

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**Income inequality is hurting children, but there are ways to undo and even prevent some of the damage.**

Lots of children in our state get what they need to thrive, just not all of them and not in every community and not all the time. We can and should do better because it's the right thing for the kids and for the state.

In its latest comparison of child well-being around the nation, The Annie E. Casey Foundation ranked Washington 19th among the states in overall child well-being. That's the average of its ranking in four categories — health, education, economic well-being, and family and community.

Every year, the report, [Kids Count](#), provides national and state report cards full of data that can help us see where we stand and how we might improve. The report that came out Tuesday found that the economic recovery is leaving too many children behind, stuck in poverty.

The report's introduction spoke to what that means and why it should matter to everyone: "When very young children experience poverty, particularly if that poverty is deep and persistent, they are at high risk of encountering difficulties later in life — having poor adolescent health, becoming teen mothers, dropping out of school and facing poor employment outcomes."

Every effective early intervention in the lives of young children saves society grief and money down the road. Each year the report has had more and stronger research to draw on for both warnings and solutions. Washington has often been a leader in adopting the best strategies, but we are hampered in that by an inefficient and inequitable tax structure. The state relies heavily on sales taxes that drop during hard times when the revenue is needed most. And the tax is a disproportionately large

burden for low-income households. Also, property taxes here carry more of the burden than in most states.

The Legislature is under court order to spend more on education. Just this week legislators approved their annual progress [report](#) to the Washington State Supreme Court to explain their efforts to adequately fund K-12 education. The lawmakers found money for all-day kindergarten and for smaller class sizes in kindergarten through third grade, but not for everything the court said the state needs to fund.

Washington ranked 20th in education among the states. Improving that position requires fighting against the effects of economic inequality, which many state leaders are trying to do through programs for young children and families.

This month, the governor signed [The Early Start Act](#), which will allow more children who get subsidies to stay in preschool when their parents' circumstances change, as well as mandating quality standards for programs that get state money, and funding some teacher training.

Seattle just selected the providers for its new [subsidized preschool](#) program. King County Executive Dow Constantine is asking voters to approve a November levy to fund a range of services for young children, starting with prenatal services and including early education.

All of these efforts are aimed at the effects of persistent income inequality. (You can find more information about public policy's impact on children from Washington Kids Count partners [Children's Alliance](#) and the [Washington State Budget and Policy Center](#).)

The latest data, from 2013, show 22 percent of American children living in poverty, according to Kids Count. Worse, the percentage of children living in areas of concentrated poverty has been increasing and stood at 14 percent between 2009 and 2013. Neighborhoods like that further diminish a child's life prospects.

Washington ranked 27th in economic well-being for children, with 19 percent of children here living in poverty and 31 percent living with parents who lack secure employment.

It should be no surprise that the economic recovery has benefited people at the top of the economic ladder most, but even the recent job growth has left many people in the bottom half of the family-income range still struggling.

As the report notes, many new jobs pay poor wages, and even as unemployment has gone down, the effect hasn't been consistent across demographic groups. The report said that the national unemployment rate for white and Asian Americans was about 4.5 percent for the last three months of 2014, but 6.7 percent for Latinos and 11 percent for black people.

On top of that, too many Latino and black people who are working have only part-time jobs.

Those differences affect the outcomes for children, but a little help can make a big difference.

The report cites a study that found that “for families with annual incomes below \$25,000, providing them with an additional \$3,000 during a child’s preschool years was associated with a 17 percent increase in their earnings as adults.”

The investments we make in families now will make this a better place to live for everyone.